

HOT TOPIC #19: April 24

Why Covering our Faces Matters So Much

COVID-19 updates from San Juan County around subjects on the minds of islanders

On April 5th, following guidance from the Centers For Disease Control and the Washington State Department of Health, we asked islanders to cover their faces when in close proximity to people from outside their household. San Juan County residents listened and for many, masks become a regular part of life. By making this commitment, islanders took a big step to further reduce the risk of disease transmission in our community.

According to San Juan County Health Officer Dr. Frank James this effort continues to be a vital recommendation, "As we head into the next phase of this crisis, the wearing of face coverings is a vital tool in keeping our community safe. While case numbers have fallen dramatically, the risk of a second surge is very real. Mask wearing will help make sure that as we slowly reopen our economy, we avoid needing to close it back down again."

Covering our faces is truly an example of a community coming together to fight a common foe. If we have the illness but are feeling healthy, face coverings greatly reduce our potential to infect others. This sort of spread was a big part of how COVID-19 got a foothold in Washington, and avoiding it in the future will let us get about our lives as quickly as possible. Covering your face also reduces the chance that you'll touch your nose or mouth with your hands.

Just because you've covered your face doesn't mean that social distancing isn't important. As some restrictions may start to be incrementally relaxed, we should all still be thoughtful about avoiding unnecessary contact with people from outside of our household, especially larger groups. And when we do need to gather or interact with the public, masks should be as common place as shirts and shoes.

Remember that some people can't wear masks due to underlying medical conditions. That's perfectly OK, and please start with the assumption when you see someone without a mask that they have a reason for it. We want to avoid shaming and judging, and instead come from a place of empathy and decency.

Dr. James wants to highlight just how important this effort is, "I can't say it any more directly- this is actually a matter of life and death. The islands have a population with lots of high-risk residents. We also have an economy that is fragile and concentrated in just a few industries. In order to get back to work, we need to do everything we can to protect our community- both from ourselves, but also when visitors may eventually start to return. Covering our faces is the frontline of that fight."

Face coverings don't need to be complicated or expensive. A number of people in the islands are making and distributing simple masks, they're available commercially, and bandanas, scarves, or other fabric coverings can work well. Any masks worn should not have an exhalation valve, as that totally defeats the purpose.

In conclusion, we want to remind the islands that these actions matter, that they're going to be with us for a while, and that the better we are at doing this, the safer our community will be and the sooner we can start to restore our economy. So support your neighbors, support staff at the grocery stores, and support small business owners who want to get back to work. Cover your face. Thank you.